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ABSTRACT

The key to initiating a training program for new composition instructors or teaching assistants (TAs), or for successfully maintaining one already in place, is to understand that TAs need to be acclimated to the discourse of composition. In addition, departments must clearly define the theories and goals underlying composition instruction, and incorporate these theories into the mandatory syllabus. Surveys of new TAs of freshman composition courses at Ohio State University (33 participated) showed that many TAs were initially unfamiliar with basic concepts of composition, and felt that the required one-week intensive course coupled with a three-credit hour non-graded introduction to composition was essential to their preparation as teachers. They also favored the use of the department-sanctioned syllabus, which contains lesson plans, instructions for managing group work, trouble-shooting advice, and most importantly, the underlying rationales for all activities. (PRA)

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Readers, Writers, Teachers: The Process of Pedagogy

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Readers, Writers, Teachers: The Process of Pedagogy

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Paper Presented at the 42nd Annual Conference on College Communication and Composition, Boston, 1991

As we examine composition's place at the present time and look forward into the nineties and beyond, one issue we must address is how the training of new instructors of composition should be conducted. We should consider the pervasiveness of contemporary composition theory at the undergraduate level to determine how informed new graduate teaching associates are as they enter our programs and as they begin the responsibility of teaching writing skills to numerous freshmen. This paper will attempt to inform our understanding of TA training by addressing two crucial questions:

* First, what do TAs generally know about basic composition theory when they enter master's and Ph.D. programs?

* Second, with an awareness of this knowledge, how can a training program best educate new TAs and produce responsible, informed, and conscientious teachers of freshman composition?

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The First Question--What Do New TAs Know About Composition?

To answer the first question--how much new graduate students in English already know about composition--on the first day of our training program at

Ohio State, I administered an informal survey based upon the one used by Toby Fulwiler and Art Young to gauge knowledge about composing processes of the faculty at Michigan Tech University. (Their survey and the results are published in Writing Across the Disciplines: Research into Practice, 66-67). As with Fulwiler and Young, I wanted to see if these new instructors understood the basics: if they indeed knew that writing was a messy, recursive process of planning, drafting, and revising, that writing was, as Janet Emig has stressed, a mode of learning, that students can learn from their peers, etc. I administered the same copy of the survey on the last day of their training.

The results of the two surveys were encouraging. I have assisted in training new grad students for three years, and the latest group appeared to be the most enlightened with regard to composition theory and practice. Of the 33 students surveyed, the majority (and by majority I mean 60% or greater) strongly agree or agreed--on both the pre and post versions-- on a number of principles that those of us who specialize in composition take for granted. Rather than bore you with a litany of statistics, though, I'll focus on the more interesting findings. For one thing, most of the TAs agreed that correcting spelling and mechanics would not solve most freshman writing problems. Also, they agreed that they need not mark every mechanical error in students' drafts, and that grades should be withheld from early drafts. Surprisingly, the TAs sensed that writing is a social act as well; most believed that students could learn from other students --TAs from the previous year's training session had tended to look askance at collaborative activities like peer responding sessions.

In addition to Fulwiler and Young's questions, I added a few of my own to test additional concerns. Because most of the new TAs at OSU (and I would think in most other grad programs) have strong literature backgrounds and plan on becoming literature specialists, one of the issues that continually crops up in TA training is why literature is not used in our freshman composition classes. Many TAs enter our program with the perception that they will teach writing the way they learned it--by having their students write critical papers which analyze novels, plays, and poems. Most new TAs have never taken a composition class; they either waived freshman English or took an honors version of a freshman writing course which emphasized the critical analysis of literature. Many are quite indignant when we stress that freshman composition should be a writing course and not a literature course, and, quite often, a new instructor's tendency is to teach freshman English as a "baby" literature course. They do not realize that, though the interpretation of belles lettres is a valuable skill, a focus on this aim of writing would be limiting indeed. To test the new group's opinion on this matter, I ask the new TAs if they felt that the critical analysis of literature was the best method of teaching writing. Again, most agreed, even those who identified their major area of interest as literature, that teaching literature was not the best way to teach writing. Thankfully, then, we did not have to fight the misperception that composition specialists loathe or disdain literature. This problem had been prevalent in the past, and I imagine it is still an issue in most English departments.

Thus, the answer to my first general question, "What do new TAs know about composition?" was promising. (Whether I can generalize and say this

is true for all other programs, or if I can predict that next year's group will answer similarly is up to question.) However, from talking to the TAs about their responses, their answers seemed to be guided more by intuition than any kind of previous training in composition at the undergraduate level. One question that the new TAs commonly ask was "what is composition?" Many were interested in taking courses in composition theory and pedagogy and even specializing in composition, but were unsure as to what that area of study entailed. Just as we are now promoting teaching writing as a social activity, an activity in which students become acclimated to the discourse of the academic community, so we must acquaint new graduate students to the discourse of the composition community.

Though the survey showed that they intuitively understood some fundamentals of composition, many TAs lack what I would call "composition literacy." New teaching assistants need to be familiarized with the language of our field. They are unfamiliar with concepts which we do not feel are highly specialized, like "recursiveness" in writing, for example. In his training journal, one TA talked about the prevalence of the prefix "re" in the language of both composition and critical theory. He wrote that his experience during the first quarter at Ohio State--a quarter in which most incoming graduate students take an introduction to critical theory as well as an introduction to the teaching of composition could be summed up with the prefix "re," for in composition "rewriting" and "revision" are stressed, while "rereading" is the key in critical theory. One challenge we in composition face then, is to define our field and begin concentrating on instituting composition theory courses at the undergraduate level. Obviously, if TAs enter our program with more

knowledge of our field, we can focus on richer and more challenging training, rather than just priming them with "basics."

I want to underscore that though TAs did not see the critical analysis of literature as the most efficacious way to teach writing, they did see connections between the study of composition and the study of literature. Because of this finding, I would disagree with those who rather myopically suggest that composition studies, so that they may apparently gain the status and authority of literature programs, be split off from the English department. Stephen North has suggested in The Making of Knowledge in Composition, that "Composition either be fully partners with, or separate from, literary studies" (374). I would not adhere to such a stark dichotomous thinking. Friction will exist between the composition specialist and other specialists, just as friction exists between the Modernist and Medievalist, or the deconstructionist and the pluralist. But as we in composition continue to struggle for a departmental identity, we must realize how important and vital TA training is to our continued existence and growth. Though some may think that instructor training is a mere administrative and financial necessity, we must see it as our chance to immerse those typically interested in literature into the language of composition, to assist them in learning that composition is a rich and valid field, one that is not totally alien to the critical study of texts. And we must continue to interact and encourage those we train long after we are finished with them, for, unfortunately, it is not uncommon for a new TA with a burgeoning interest in composition studies to be swayed back into literature by a jaded adviser who personally feels composition does not merit much attention.

The Second Question: What do TAs Find Most Valuable in Training Sessions?

To answer my second question, what TAs find most valuable in training sessions, I again employed a survey, this time administering it to TAs who had completed training last year and had had at least one year's teaching experience. Again, I found generally positive results. First, the vast majority of experienced TAs felt that our required one-week intensive program, combined with a three-credit hour non-graded introduction to composition, was essential to their preparation as teachers. I feel this is significant because many English departments feel that TA training should consist of handing new graduate students a suggested syllabus and wishing them luck.

Also, the OSU program requires that all new TAs teach according to a department-sanctioned syllabus for two quarters. We believe that having new TAs conform to a syllabus which is informed by knowledge and theory accrued over many years provides TAs with the foundation they need when thinking out their own syllabus in the future. We want to stress that teaching according to one's own syllabus is an earned freedom, something that must be rooted in some measure of experience and knowledge. Our required syllabus is not just a list of activities for each week either. It is an incredibly detailed guide which presents a lesson plan for each class period, including specific instructions for managing group work, trouble-shooting advice for

each writing task, and clear rationales for all activities.

The syllabus is a product of the accretive experiences of the TAs themselves as well. The final assignment in our training project is a collaborative project in which groups of six TAs restructure a portion of the present syllabus by assessing its strengths and weaknesses according to their first-quarter experience in the actual classroom. As Donovan, Sprouse, and Williams noted in "How TAs Teach Themselves," very early in the term, "They [TAs] become teachers. They discover that there is more involved than imparting a codified body of knowledge, following a packaged lesson plan, or mimicking another teacher" (Training the New Teacher... 140). TAs also learn that it is essential to dramatize the theory and goals that undergird instruction-- this imperative may seem stunningly obvious, but often goals are stated vaguely on some sheet that resembles a catalog course description. Certainly, everyone's goal is to teach good writing, but what does that mean? If indeed --as Richard Fulkerson has recently argued ("Composition Theory. . . " 424)-- the current state of composition studies indicates as shared axiology, a rhetorical axiology that stresses the social nature of writing, new TAs must first be familiarized with this movement and the movements that preceded it, and understand how pedagogy reflects that axiology.

As Ann Berthoff argued in The Making of Meaning a decade ago, when you share an assignment or exercise, you must also share the theory behind it. She states, "the exercise comes typed up with a little theoretical statement at the top, an explanation of whatever aspect or function of learning the assignment is meant to exercise" (34). Berthoff's point may seem obvious,

but one thing we have found that is essential for training new TAs and essential for them to communicate to their students is the underlying rationales for each activity. Teaching is a rhetorical activity, and confusion about the purpose of your pedagogy has the same effect as confusion about purpose in writing. We must make it eminently clear why TAs are teaching certain papers and how class activities contribute to students learning certain writing tasks. From classroom observations, we have noted that the best teachers are those who understand not only what they are doing, but more importantly why they are doing it. The key is that composition instructors should communicate to the students the rationale for each classroom activity. Conducting a class in a vacuum, or treating activities as some sort of riddle that leave students guessing at their purpose can only lead to frustration and apathy. Just as we strive for purpose in writing, so must we strive for purpose in our teaching.

The reason I am underscoring the importance of our mandatory syllabus, one which stresses the purpose of teaching, is that almost 90% of the experienced TAs I surveyed strongly agreed that teaching according to our syllabus for two quarters was essential in assisting them in writing their own syllabus. In fact, many experienced TAs, even those who have taught for three or four years, still use a version of the syllabus developed by the freshman composition program. In other words, learning to manage a solid syllabus--the product of years of practice and theory--should be the foundation of any training program. Such a syllabus may set the precedent for how TAs, and subsequently professors, teach future English courses--including literature.

To sum up, the keys to initiating a training program for new TAs, or for successfully maintaining one already in place, is to understand that TAs need to be acclimated to the discourse of composition. Also, to further empower them, to make them conscientious and innovative teachers, we must make it clear what theories and goals underlie instruction and incorporate those into our syllabi.

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